Resignation Mars Nixon

FPost 8/12/74

WASHINGTON (AP) — Once hailed as a political miracle worker, Richard M. Nixon has seen his election triumphs reduced to ashes, leaving many Americans wodering if he really did have that sure touch for politics.

How could a smart politician permit the Watergate burglary, which seemed safely consigned as a footnote to history in early 1973, to mushroom into the most shattering disaster ever to overtake an American president?

Some observers questioned Nixon's credentials as a master politician even before Watergate.

Take the big "Nixon miracle" of 1968 when the onetime vice president captured the highest office just six years after seemingly renouncing all political ambition with the emotional declaration, "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference."

He had, of course, just lost a race for governor of California and, in anger and frustration, pronounced his own political obituary — or so it seemed at the time.

The 1968 Nixon comeback indeed had its dramatic elements. But his campaign that year, against a Democratic opponent hobbled by close association with an unpopular Lyndon B. Johnson, hardly offered proof that winner Nixon was a politician with a sure touch.

In late September, with the campaign well under way, the Gallup Poll gave Nixon a 15-point edge over Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey. A landslide appeared in the making.

Nixon held a news conference at which he outlined a careful strategy to court the votes of key states and insure that his campaign "peaked" — a word Nixon has used often — precisely on election day.

It didn't happen that way. A cautious Nixon frittered away his enormous advantage as the campaign progressed. Election day found him the winner by less than 500,000 votes — an advantage measured as a fraction of one per cent of the 73 million ballots cast.

Many Humphrey partisans contended their man would have won had the campaign continued for another week with Nixon sticking to his play-it-safe strategy.

Similarly, Nixon appeared to toss away an excellent opportunity to win the presidency over John F. Kennedy in 1960. As the incumbent Republican vice president for eight years, Nixon came closer to being a household name and, at the start of the campaign, enjoyed a 53-47 Gallup Poll edge over Kennedy.

Perhaps due in large measure to a cocky but unwise decision to join the lesser-known Kennedy in a series of broadcast debates watched by an estimated 85 million Americans, Nixon saw his safe advantage erode until his challenger emerged the winner in the closest presidential election in 76 years.

Even as President, and quite apart from Watergate horrors, Nixon's political acumen was not above challenge despite his easy 1972 re-election by a historic margin.

Try as Nixon did, he never was able to generate public fervor for a broad package of domestic initiatives he variously labeled The New Federalism and The Second American Revolution.

While voters greeted most of his domestic legislation with a ho-hum attitude, aides said in Nixon's defense that such innovative concepts have no impact on individual voters until they are put in place.

Nixon had better luck in staking out positions on emotional issues that appealed to segments of his core constituency — opposition to busing to achieve racial integration and support for federal aid to parochial schools.

In the foreign affairs area, Nixon influenced voters in a way he couldn't manage in domestic policy. He showed finesse, and perhaps a good sense of timing, in working with Henry A. Kissinger to promote rapprochement with mainland China and detente with the Soviet Union — moves that would have aroused intense opposition a few years earlier.